

Should We Teach Students at Their Reading Levels?

Consider the research when personalizing your lesson plans

by Timothy Shanahan



Shanahan, recipient of the 2013 William S. Gray Citation of Merit for outstanding contributions to the field of reading, gave the annual research address at the IRA 2014 Conference in New Orleans. The following is a summary of his speech, serving as a reminder of the key points to keep in mind in today's classroom.

Reading experts—including many International Reading Association presidents and Reading Hall of Fame members—have championed the idea of teaching children at their “reading levels.” The idea has been that if texts are too challenging or too easy, learning won’t happen, so teachers must find the “just right” books to present to their students.

This appealing idea has adherents among special educators and those who teach English learners, too. Many instructional programs embrace student-text matching as part of the fundamental design of their products, and teacher education

has also focused heavily on preparing young teachers to administer informal reading inventories and running records to place kids in just the right books. No wonder surveys show that the majority of elementary teachers claim to teach at the instructional level.

When I taught elementary school, I dutifully tested each of my students to find their independent, instructional, and frustration levels—dividing them into groups built around instructional-level texts. It was a lot of work, but I believed it helped me to teach reading successfully, a belief shared by tens of thousands of teachers who match kids to books with level-designating, brightly colored stickers on their spines.

But what if that doesn't actually work?

Since 2010, more than 40 states have adopted English language arts standards that will require teachers to teach students with more challenging texts. These standards have been adopted because to teach students at “their levels” is to guarantee a lack of adequate reading proficiency by graduation. If low-performing fourth-graders are to be taught from second-grade books, when do they catch up?

This disagreement raises a dilemma for teachers: follow what leading experts say must be done to support children’s learning, or follow the outcome requirements adopted by their states. What’s a good teacher to do?

Misuse of research evidence

Enter research. This is exactly the kind of dilemma that should lead educators to turn to research evidence. Rather than relying on pronouncements from on high or just complying, it makes greater sense to seek evidence.

That’s what I set out to do and I was chagrined to find that, though research was often cited supporting instructional-level teaching, the claims didn’t match the research very well. Studies that appeared to support text matching were cited, but contrary evidence tended to be neglected. For instance, Rollanda O’Connor reported two studies of the impact of text matching on student learning, both appearing in the same journal. In one study, text matching facilitated learning for disabled readers at beginning reading levels. However, when she repeated the study, this time controlling for differences in teacher explanations, the benefits of text matching disappeared. The first study is widely cited—though usually without any mention that the effect was found only for the lowest-leveled readers (and remember there is no discrepancy between instructional-level teaching and the new standards for beginning readers), while the improved follow-up study has usually been disregarded.

Sometimes the cited studies don’t even seem to have been consulted. For instance, P.A. Killgallon’s doctoral dissertation is the source of how we identify instructional level. Many discussions of instructional level note this, but claim Killgallon found teaching students at instructional level led to enhanced learning. An interesting claim, but not one made by Killgallon, who never even attempted to measure learning in his study.

These are just a couple of examples of the rhetorical twisting that has taken place, but you get the idea. Discussions of teaching with texts written at students’ reading levels have been tainted by selective citing (cherry picking studies to support the claims); mischaracterization (making claims the researcher never did); overgeneralization (ignoring the limitations specified by the

researcher); and the citing of expert opinions as if they were research findings.

This might explain why researchers like Bob Slavin and Maureen Hallinan could never find learning benefits from within-class reading grouping. If instructional-level placement works, then one would expect to find greater learning in classrooms with multiple small groups. That hasn’t been the case.

Misleading argument tactics have no place in educational debate. I don’t believe that these experts have intentionally misled teachers, but that they were so sure they were right that they misled themselves. It has been more a failure of imagination than scientific fraud. Anyone who has seen a student struggling with frustration-level text will appreciate my point. It isn’t obvious how to support learning in such situations, so wise counsel has been to flee to easier materials.

A new instructional-level concept

Except for the earlier mentioned O’Connor study, and that only with beginning-reading levels, there is no credible evidence supporting learning benefits from teaching kids at their levels.

This may be surprising, but there is a growing body of research showing no consistent relationship between student-text matching and learning. Some studies have even found that students can sometimes learn best from so-called frustration-level materials.

These research studies have convinced me that instructional-level performances may be important in learning, but that we have badly conceptualized the idea. The point shouldn’t be to place students in books easy enough to ensure good reading, but to provide enough scaffolding to allow them to read harder books successfully.

So far, I’ve identified 23 studies that have done just that. (A list of the studies can be found at www.reading.org/scaffolding-studies.) They’ve had students practice oral reading prior to reading for comprehension, or teachers pre-taught vocabulary. Such scaffolding allowed students to read these frustration-level texts *as if* they were at their instructional levels. Instructional level is not where lessons should begin, but where they need to end. ■

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